

NLR sets 100 th-year wingding for May 1

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One hundred years of North Little Rock's history as an independent city will be commemorated with a birthday party on the first weekend in May along four blocks of downtown Main Street, city officials announced Wednesday.

Academy Award-winning actress Mary Steenburgen will return to her childhood home of North Little Rock with her husband, actor Ted Danson, to serve as honorary chairman of centennial events on May 1, committee officials said.

Plans include recognition of the city's railroad and military histories and the historic significance of the city's riverfront as a stop on the Trail of Tears relocation of American Indians.

The commemoration "will not be just a party," said Vincent Insalaco, Centennial Committee chairman. "It's going to be a great celebration of the city."

Mayor Patrick Hays invited all residents and visitors to participate. "One hundred years ago we started on an adventure," said Hays, wearing a centennial anniversary T-shirt at City Hall. "One hundred years is a milestone in anyone's existence. ... We're going to have some fun."

The centennial is a misnomer of sorts. The original town of Argenta, from which North Little Rock's downtown Argenta Historic District takes its name, began in 1871. North Little Rock first incorporated in 1901.

North Little Rock's history is unique with its several twists and turns along the road to becoming the city it is today, said Sandra Taylor-Smith, North Little Rock History Commission director. It's virtually impossible to settle on a true date of origination, she said.

Even the centennial celebration is billed in materials released Wednesday as marking the city's "emergence as an independent city," rather than its formation.

North Little Rock's observance centers on this being the 100th anniversary of the 1904 Arkansas Supreme Court decision that upheld the merger of Argenta — then a political ward of neighboring Little Rock — with North Little Rock. City officials renamed the city Argenta in 1906 then changed it back to North Little Rock in 1917.

"People call me to ask when was the city founded, and it's not nearly that simple," Taylor-Smith said. "It's a very complicated history but very unique. It's not boring."

To help explain the city's history, three re-enactments are planned during the celebration to illustrate significant events: The Trail of Tears, the influence of the railroad, and a city ordinance directing all Little Rock officials to "clear the territory" after the state Supreme Court decision on the merger of Argenta and North Little Rock.

During the Indian Removal Program along what became known as the Trail of Tears in the 1830s and 1840s, Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians crossed the Arkansas River at a North Little Rock ferry to take a southwest trail to the Indian Territory. The Seminole, Creek and Cherokee followed a trail north of the river through North Little Rock.

While the passage of tribes was documented, it has only been since late 2002 that city officials learned of the north riverbank being a major junction for several overland and river routes. What is now Main Street was part of the trail itself, Hays said.

"This [significance] is something we were not aware of," Taylor-Smith said.

To observe the city's link to the Trail of Tears, Michael Mardell, National Parks Service superintendent at the Little Rock Central High School National Park, presented Hays with a certificate Wednesday denoting the city's Riverfront Park as a National Historic Trail of Tears location.

A prayer breakfast at 8 a.m. on May 1 at one of the landing sites between the Main Street Bridge and the Interstate 30 bridge will begin the second day of events while commemorating that portion of the city's history.

More information on events is available from the North Little Rock History Commission at (501) 371-0755.